

**Fourth Sunday after Pentecost Year A (28 June 2020)****Lectionary Reading:** Matthew 10:40-42

*“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me”.*

These words from the 10th Chapter of Matthew’s Gospel are among the final ones in the long list of instructions Jesus has given his disciples before sending them out to preach the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Over the last three weeks, we’ve heard Jesus make it clear to the disciples that they are to share in his poverty and homelessness, taking with them no money or extra clothing, depending solely on the hospitality of others for shelter and sustenance.

They are told that they will not be welcomed everywhere, and they can expect to experience the same hostility Jesus often did, for he was sending them out "like sheep into the midst of wolves". They can expect to encounter persecution and trials, for "a disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master". They need also be prepared for painful division within families, and to be willing to put Jesus' mission above family loyalties. For all of this risk and suffering, Jesus promises, "those who lose their life for my sake will find it".

And then we come to today’s verses where we hear Jesus teach about ‘welcome’ which is rooted in the ancient practices of hospitality.

At times hospitality can be very much like the story I read of a woman who had invited some people to dinner. At the table, she

turned to her six-year-old daughter and said, ‘Darling, would you like to say grace?’ ‘I wouldn't know what to say,’ the little girl replied. ‘Just say what you hear Mummy say,’ the mother said. The little girl smiled, bowed her head and prayed, ‘Dear Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner?’

Most of us probably do not find it too difficult to offer hospitality to our family and friends, but today we hear Jesus teach about hospitality in the context of discipleship. These verses speak about hospitality as receiving and welcoming the stranger. Jesus reminds his disciples and us of a very profound privilege, and, along with that, a tremendous responsibility.

In ancient Israel, hospitality was paramount and was central to the Hebrew identity. Not only due to its history as a nomadic people in a harsh environment, but also as a demonstration of faithfulness to God. It was a religious and social obligation.

When a traveller came to town, they waited by the well, and the townspeople had to house and feed the visitor for the night. Of course, these travellers were rarely family. These were folks unknown to the community. They were aliens, often foreigners, people who had different foods, different clothes, different languages, different gods. Opening one's home was risky.

Matthew's gospel also tells us that the giving or refusing of hospitality to Jesus' followers was regarded as an indication of either acceptance or rejection of the gospel and therefore of Jesus, and by extension, God himself. Jesus in effect saying, “How you treat the other is how you treat me.”

Hospitality is one of the main missions of the Medical Missionaries of Mary Sisters (of whom I was a member and continue to be an associate) who follow the Benedictine Rule. For Benedict a faith community existed to do two things: first to help its members find God and, secondly to be a living, visible and tangible witness to the love God has for each and every person and especially those seeking hospitality.

In Chapter 53 of the Rule, Benedict wrote: *'Any guest who happens to arrive at the monastery should be received just as we would receive Christ himself.'* Benedict is saying how we meet and greet people is directly correlated with how we 'meet and greet Jesus.' He goes on to say: 'Guests should always be treated with respect and deference' and that 'the greatest care should be taken to give a warm welcome to the poor and pilgrim, because it is in them above all else that Christ is welcomed.

Hospitality then, in the Christian sense, is so much more than just inviting someone over for good conversation and a good meal. Henri Nouwen said this about hospitality - "Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines."

Honest reaching out means inviting the stranger into our world and on his or her terms, not on ours. It means letting people just be and letting God do his transforming work in his own time, and as we know, God can have frustratingly slow timetables.

Being permanently present to whoever comes through the door in hospitality, in acceptance, in love is no small thing, it is challenging and radical stuff.

One of my roles as a YouthCARE area chaplain was to train those who wanted to become school chaplains. They came from many different backgrounds and Church affiliations. One of the areas of training that many of them struggled with was the rule that as school chaplains they were not allowed to proselytise; they were not allowed to try to convert those within the school community to Christianity.

If someone raised issues of faith, then their need was met and the chaplain engaged with their questions and wonderings. If not, then they discussed what they wished to discuss. You can imagine that this was very difficult for some of our evangelical theological chaplains, who took Jesus' commission to go and make disciples very seriously! As part of their training experience, these students came to learn that, while they could not preach the Gospel, they could be the gospel - bringing Christ's presence to the other.

This was exactly the same experience for myself as a FIFO chaplain with FMG in the Pilbara, as it is for those who work in hospitals and other chaplaincies.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it very well in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*: "The bearers of Jesus' word receive a final word of promise for their work. They are now Christ's fellow workers, and will be like him in all things. Thus they are to meet those to whom they are sent as if they were Christ himself. When they are

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welcomed into a house, Christ enters with them. They are bearers of his presence. They bring with them the most precious gift in the world, the gift of Jesus Christ."

Hospitality then, is no small thing. Jesus tells us that we represent and symbolize him before others. We are Christ-bearers. It means opening ourselves up to all sorts of encounters: many affirming, some uncomfortable. It involves patience and acceptance and love. Yet we are called to be hospitable and to welcome all.

But he tells us that the reverse is also true: that others represent and symbolize Christ before us. Jesus assures us that he himself is present in our lives when we welcome others into our midst. He is also present when others do the same for us.

To be able to welcome others, and in turn to be welcomed, are integral to the mission of God in the world. When we are doing this, both in the giving and receiving of hospitality, we are part of the ministry of Jesus, who wants us to witness to God's presence, to God's welcome, to God's hospitality ... both within the church community and outside of it.

We also come to realize that our welcoming does not need to consist of large, heroic acts. Any simple, basic acts of kindness we offer as genuine welcome for one another are all that God requires of us. All we need do is look around to see who is in need and try to do something about it.

According to Jesus, there is no small gesture. A cup of cold water is the smallest of gifts – a gift that almost anyone can give. But a cup

of cold water is precious to a person who is really thirsty – in some instances, the gift of life itself.

So, the next time you give or receive hospitality, remember to rejoice in the other person's presence; remember that it may very well make all the difference in the world to the person who is benefiting from your kindness. And remember that the reverse is also true; that person may be the very presence of Christ for you in an unexpected time and place.

“Whoever welcome you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

**The Lord be with you.**